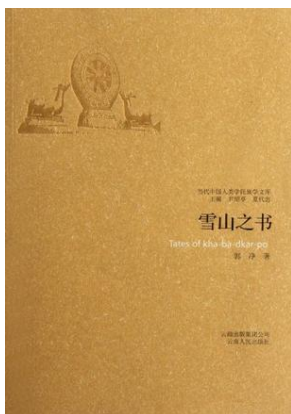


## REVIEW: *TALES OF KHA BA DKAR PO*

Reviewed by Jundan (Jasmine) Zhang (University of Otago)



Jing Guo 郭净. 2012. *Xue shan zhi shu* 雪山之书 [*Tales of Kha ba dkar po*] [ཁ་བ་དཀར་པོ་]. Kunming 昆明: Yunnan People's Press 云南人民出版社. 531pp, ethnography, notes, oral history, 134 photos, 29 maps, and 5 illustrations. ISBN: 9787222088979 (paper, 68RMB).

My favorite color is to add a little white on the whiteness, as if there was a snow-white eagle landing on a snow-covered mountain rock. My favorite color is to add a bit green on the greenness, as if there was an emerald parrot flying in the wild walnut woods. *Deqin xianzi lyrics*.

These lyrics evoke a space beyond a sense of realism. In his book, *Tales of Kha ba dkar po* (*ToK*), Guo mentions these lines three times, suggesting a transcendental experience one may encounter in Tibetan areas while, at the same time, humbled by the mindset of human-nature relations enacted by Tibetan people. *ToK* is, in many ways, a valuable academic work. Guo's favorite lines of *xianzi* allude to a 'space-in-between' the secular and sacred, which provides a unique experience for a broad readership, and induces the readers to deeper reflections on topics such as 'nature/ culture', 'belief', 'rite', and 'life/ death'.

*ToK* is one of nineteen contemporary anthropological and ethnological works conducted in Yunnan Province, Southwest China and published in the 'Anthropology and Ethnology series in

Contemporary China'. In the preface for the series, Yin (2012) suggests that there are two primary reasons for the somewhat slow development of Chinese scholarship in the field of anthropology and ethnology. One is the historically Han-centered intellectual atmosphere, and the other is the ideological ambivalence that ethnic culture has faced since the establishment of the People's Republic of China. In this context, Guo's longitudinal academic and intellectual engagement with the Tibetan communities in northwest Yunnan is included in this series as part of the increasing recognition of the significance of understanding southwest China's complex ethnic and cultural diversity.

The book consists of eighteen chapters. According to the author's postscript, the book is a compilation of stories he collected since first visiting Deqin in 1995, and a tribute to the people he encountered in his research journeys. It is difficult to clearly categorize this book, as it blends Guo's personal reflections, as well as ethnographic materials from the field. Employing a narrative style, Guo elegantly relates these stories from around Kha ba dkar po, one of the most significant sacred mountains in Tibetan areas, and the only one whose summit has never been climbed by humans. Located in Deqin County, Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Kha ba dkar po has been central to the cosmology of the Bon religion and Tibetan Buddhism at least since the early Tubo era<sup>1</sup> and, Guo argues, even earlier. However, since the late twentieth century Kha ba dkar po has become increasingly exposed to non-Tibetan populations, primarily in the form of climbing expeditions and tourists. Kha ba dkar po has also become known as 'Mt. Meili' after a government survey in the 1950s erroneously identified it thus. 'Meili' is used as a name in tourist literature, though it lacks the historical and spiritual significance of 'Kha ba dkar po' to Tibetans. On this point, Guo argues that:

---

<sup>1</sup> According to van Schaik (2011), the Tibetan Empire started with the first emperor Srong bstan sgam po's uniting of Tibetan Plateau in early seventh century.

Kha ba dkar po is a sacred site, [but] Mt. Meili is a secular and scenic site. Two names for the same place reflect the different perceptions and understanding of different groups towards it (223).

The whole book can be seen as narratives organized around the sacred/ secular attributes of Kha ba dkar po and how different groups perceive and adapt to these attributes. In investigating cosmology and ecological knowledge in Deqin County since 1995, Guo became fascinated by and familiar with the area. His book sheds light on important topics such as sacred geography, indigenous conservation, tourism, and intangible heritage. This book is thus not merely an 'ethnographic' record of a particular 'locality' but, instead, presents a complexity that comes as what Tsing (2005:6) calls "universals not as truths or lies but as sticky engagements," in which the narratives from the research area intersect and traverse the local and the global.

Generally following chronological order, Guo starts the book with a mysterious tragedy in 1991, when a group of Japanese and Chinese mountaineers died while climbing Kha ba dkar po. Guo explains that his long-term engagement with Kha ba dkar po started from an investigation of how local villagers, as well as the general public, perceived the 1991 tragedy. Based in Shar tang Village, Guo collected stories from villagers in Shar tang and nearby villages, such as Me long and Gsal nang. In the different narratives, a contrast emerges between the general public's views of mountain climbing as "representing human beings' spirit to endlessly challenge their limits" (49), and villagers' views that the "sacred mountains must not be summited" (42). Another attempt to summit Kha ba dkar po in 1999 evoked furious discussion on the Internet. Critical questions appeared, such as whether climbing Kha ba dkar po helps to better understand the mountain or to demean it, the difference between Tibetan people's beliefs and mountaineers' spirit, and to whom Kha ba dkar po belongs. These questions elicited inquiry in broader contexts, where it became clear that varying opinions on mountaineering reflect different understandings of the relationships between humans and nature.

How local Tibetan villagers interpret and adapt to environmental changes in further relation to the role of 'sacred mountains' in an ecological and cosmological sense is thus one focus of the book. Chapter Three investigates the 'growing numbers of wolves' in Deqin County as an illustration of the belief system deployed by local Tibetans. The majority of the villagers Guo talked to consider the growing incidents of wolves harming animals and people to be spiritual in nature, because wolves are considered the 'guard dogs' of Kha ba dkar po.

Chapter Four extends the problem of wolves to the shrinking Me long Glacier, which is significant as the largest glacier in Yunnan Province, and the glacier whose tongue has the lowest elevation in China. Me long Village is directly influenced by this glacier, because of its degradation and because of its spiritual significance. Since the 1991 mountain-climbing catastrophe, Me long villagers have been involved in the search for the victims' remains. While trying to help the bereaved families, the villagers also believe that the bodies have contaminated the glacier. In addition, infrastructure improvement and tourism development in the glacial area in recent years are believed to be disturbing the sacred mountain. According to the villagers, the bodies of victims, rubbish left by tourists, and such inappropriate behavior as talking and laughing loudly, breaking tree branches, and picking flowers, lead to many accidents associated with the Me long Glacier. These stories indicate that, while locals are exposed to modern scientific knowledge, a strong tendency to interpret environmental changes through spiritual notions remains. Guo's suggestion is to "listen carefully to the stories of local people on how they have gotten along with the 'wild' for generations" (78) in the conflict between human and non-human interests.

It would be naïve and simplistic to think that Guo is attempting to promote a preservation of 'indigenous knowledge' and maintain an unchanging past. After being in the region for almost two decades, Guo humbly proposes, "I believe one should have two spaces, one secular and the other sacred. What matters is that one can travel in between these two spaces freely" (412). Much of the book is in fact

about how people from different times and spaces try to travel between the secular and sacred. From historical figures, such as Western missionaries and explorers, to more contemporary environmentalists, volunteers, and tourists, Guo records stories about encounters with Kha ba dkar po as 'outsiders' (both Westerners and people from elsewhere in China) have had with Kha ba dkar po. Guo states that "we are all just a small part of the crowd who attempts to peep into Kha ba dkar po's secrets" (20). No matter what we do, or desire, the mountain is always there. Although this is perhaps a reflection on the privileged position of 'humans' vis-à-vis 'nature' that is gazed-upon by humans, a certain kind of criticality is absent here. There is a missed opportunity to engage with theories of Orientalism and Postcolonialism that might better illuminate the issue of the researcher's positionality.

The whole book is permeated with an aura that reminds us of the Tibetan belief that humans are forever living in Samsara, which suggests that our current life is only part of the journey of existence. However, people *travel* differently, which nowadays includes tourists with outdoor clothes and cameras arriving by jeep and airplane (Chapter Nine), the *ab cor* 'circumambulators' keep walking to complete their *skor ba* 'circuits' (Chapter Twelve and Seventeen). The interaction between humans and nature in Deqin County cannot easily be defined by the categories of ecocentrism and anthropocentrism, which are often used by scholars to describe environmental attitudes (Drenthen 2011). Guo points out that the cosmology derived from Tibetan Buddhism is successional rather than disruptive (Zhang 2009), that human beings are the same as other beings, comprised of the five basic elements (earth, water, fire, wind, and 'space'), and thus, for Tibetans, nature and culture do not stand as a binary. Guo suggests that it is useful to understand Kha ba dkar po as well as other sacred places in northwest Yunnan as 'sacred natural sites', a term which is defined as "areas of land or water having special spiritual significance to peoples and communities" (Wild et al. 2008:5). Tibetan communities in northwest Yunnan have a long-established natural resource management system that is

integrated with their belief in the mountain as a spiritual channel between humans and deities. People's subsistence needs are closely related to forest and pastoral resources, and such dependence reinforces the belief that people are protected by the sacred mountains. Rituals, folklore, and other forms of intangible cultural heritage, such as dances and songs, are some of the many forms that show such belief (Chapter Thirteen, Fourteen, and Fifteen). While the functionality of 'sacred natural sites' has been noted and recorded, Coggins and Gesang Zeren (2014) argue that there is still much to learn about the distinctions between ontology and cosmology, in order to avoid a simple deployment of deities in nature conservation.

Besides texts, Guo also presents several photographs, as well as maps and illustrations drawn both by him and local villagers. As one of the earliest ethnographers in China to include digital photography in his research, Guo confesses that the digital camera is the 'digital eye' of so-called 'modern people', and it sees a different 'reality' from that of locals. With awareness that a researcher/outsider's camera often tends to capture local life as timeless and fixed, Guo tries to avoid such misinterpretation by including more recent changes in this region. One of the most urgent issues that arises is the conflict between development and conservation.

Guo argues that many conservation programs are dependent on the epistemology of 'ecocentrism' and are ignorant of the omnipresent interconnections between humans and nature. Guo then suggests that only if conservation in Tibetan communities becomes internalized and ritualized can humans recover our connections with nature. The emphasis on indigenous ecological knowledge can be found in the field of 'cultural ecology'.

Rappaport (1979) argued that religion and ritual were forces that preserved ecological stability, and non-Western subsistence systems were dependent on the "coherence, orderliness, and meaningfulness of conceptual structures (that) liturgy organizes" (129). On the other hand, other researchers such as Netting (1993), contend that social institutions and practices function as the basis for more ecologically benign pre-capitalist societies, and destruction

comes with the authoritarian force that reforms and breaks such social institutions and practices. Related to Rappaport and Netting's arguments, Guo observes that "some people are thinking: should Tibetans keep their simple lifestyle and belief, or turn into performers of culture in order to satisfy the secular desire of consumption?" (213). By addressing such thoughts from local Tibetans, Guo shows concern about economic transformations and their impact on Tibetan villagers. However, Guo insists that instead of further pursuing the reasons behind such thoughts, the villagers themselves should be left alone to decide for themselves. This lack of engagement with the political, social, and economic context weakens Guo's argument.

I read Guo's *Tales of Kha ba dkar po* during my 2013 fieldwork in Niru Village, Luoji Town, Shangrila County, northwest Yunnan Province. Tibetan communities are highly diverse in language and custom as evident in the differences between Niru Village and the villages that Guo studied. Nevertheless, there are many similarities between Niru Village and the Tibetan villages in Guo's encounters. The transcendental sense hovering between the lines of the book often blended with the moisture in the air on the rainy days during August and September in Niru Village. When the rain hindered farm work or when electricity was cut, people sat by the fire, drinking *sulima* (a liquor made from herbs and mixed with yak butter tea), chatting, or doing wool craft. Sometimes I sat beside 'Grandma' and read a few pages from the book. She would gaze at the book and smile in a puzzled way. I pointed to the book, saying, "Kha ba dkar po," and she would nod and reply, "*Gzhi bdag*" 'mountain deity', and would then carry on with her handicraft. *Tales of Kha ba dkar po* is not only about one sacred mountain in a Tibetan area, but is also an in-depth inquiry into every reader's heart and soul. Reading the book, I often felt I was chatting with Guo Jing, which made me reflect on my own position as a researcher, for he never stops including himself in the gaze of his digital camera. Whatever I wish to claim that I understand from this book, or my fieldwork, Guo reminds me that we all have different 'ways of seeing'. Ethnography perhaps is one such 'way of seeing' (Wolcott 1999:270) but:

no matter if you are tourists who come to climb the mountain, researchers who come to investigate culture or nature, or tourism companies who come to plan future itineraries, you are all just seeing whatever you want to see.

Perhaps the deeper meaning of Kha ba dkar po will never be fully understood. Perhaps we should think of life as a journey, and be grateful to travel between the spaces of the secular and the sacred. Nevertheless, echoing the increasing attention to the Sino-Tibetan borderlands (Yeh and Coggins 2014), Guo's work in Deqin contributes to a better understanding of the grand transformation of political, economic and physical landscapes in modern China.

#### REFERENCES

- Coggins, Chris and Gesang Zeren. 2014. Animate Landscapes: Nature Conservation and the Production of Agropastoral Sacred Space in Shangrila in E Yeh and C Coggins (eds) *Mapping Shangrila: Nature, Personhood, and Sovereignty in the Sino-Tibetan Borderlands*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 205-228.
- Netting, Robert. 1993. *Smallholders, Householders: Farm Families and the Ecology of Intensive, Sustainable Agriculture*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Rappaport, Roy Amos. 1979. *Ecology, Meaning and Religion*. Richmond: North Atlantic Books.
- Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt. 2005. *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Wild, Robert, Christopher McLeod, and Peter Valentine. 2008. *Sacred Natural Sites: Guidelines for Protected Area Managers*. Gland, Switzerland and Paris, France: IUCN.
- Wolcott, Harry. 1999. *Ethnography: A Way of Seeing*. Oxford: AltaMira Press.



- Yeh, Emily T, and Chris Coggins (eds). 2014. *Mapping Shangri-La: Contested Landscapes in the Sino-Tibetan Borderlands*. Seattle and London: University of Washington Press.
- Yin Shaoting 尹绍亭. 2012. *Xue shan zhi shu* 雪山之书 *Tales of Kha ba dkar po*. Kunming 昆明: Yunnan renmin chubanshe 云南人民出版社 [Yunnan People's Press].
- Zhang Guangzhi 张光直. 2009. *Kao gu xue zhuan ti liu jiang* 考古学专题六讲 [*Six Thematic Lectures in Archeology*]. Beijing 北京: Shenghuo dushu xinzhi sanlian shudian 生活读书新知三联书店 [SDX Joint Publishing Company].

#### NON-ENGLISH TERMS

*ab cor* ཨབ་ཙོར།

Deqin xianzi 德钦弦子

Deqin 德钦 County

Diqing 迪庆 Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture

Gsal nang གསལ་ནང།

*gzhi bdag* གཞི་བདག།

Kha ba dkar po ཁ་བ་དཀར་པོ།

Luoji 洛吉 Town

Me long མེ་ལོང།

Niru 尼汝 Village

Shar tang ཤར་ཏང།

*skor ba* སྐོར་བ།

Srong btsan sgam po སྟོང་བཙན་སྐམ་པོ།

*sulima* 酥里玛

*xianzi* 弦子